



June 19, 2021

Dear Fellow Marylander:

Were you surprised that yesterday was a federal holiday? After more than 150 years of unofficial commemorations and a multi-year effort to create an official holiday, Congress came together this last week to pass legislation, and Thursday President Joe Biden signed into law, recognition of the Juneteenth National Independence Day holiday. We celebrated yesterday because Juneteenth (today!) is a Saturday this year.

I have long supported legislation to add Juneteenth to the list of legal, federal public holidays and was proud to see this finally happen.

Most African Americans are familiar with Juneteenth, the date on which the news of the end of slavery reached the enslaved peoples in the Southwestern States. On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger and Union soldiers communicated the news of liberation to one of the last remaining confederate outposts in Galveston, Texas. More than two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the enslaved individuals there had yet to hear the news.

While many may be new to Juneteenth, African-American communities nationwide, including in Maryland, have developed rich traditions around this historically significant date. For all, Juneteenth offers an opportunity to reflect upon and to educate ourselves further about the terrible history of slavery and its enduring legacy that lives on today.

One such persistent impact is access to the ballot box. Dozens of studies and countless personal stories combine to tell us how African Americans still experience greater barriers to voting than do white Americans. Today, one of the most important tenets of our comprehensive legislation to protect democracy, the *For the People Act*, is enacting a federal floor when it comes to voting rights standards.

I've written to you about the *For the People Act* previously, but did you know that many voter disenfranchisement laws today come from post-Civil War efforts to stifle the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments? Between 1865 and 1880, at least 13

states enacted or expanded their felony disenfranchisement laws. One of the primary goals of these laws was to prevent African Americans from voting. At least 11 of those states still bar individuals on felony probation or parole from voting.

Under our Constitution, there is no legitimate justification for denying people from having a voice in our democracy. Disenfranchising citizens who are living and working in the community serves no compelling State interest and hinders their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. My ‘[Democracy Restoration Act](#)’ (S. 481) would restore federal voting rights for all individuals immediately upon release from incarceration. I am proud that this legislation, and my “[Deceptive Practices and Voter Intimidation Prevention Act](#),” are included within the *For the People Act*.

The Senate should have our first procedural votes on the *For the People Act* next week. I will update you as it progresses. My hope is that we can find a bipartisan path forward on protecting voter rights.

Finally, I want to commend lawmakers in Maryland for bipartisan restorative justice work over the past several years. The Maryland General Assembly voted nearly unanimously in 2019 to investigate the more than 40 documented racial terror lynchings that took place in Maryland between 1854 and 1933; to hold public hearings in communities where racial terror lynchings occurred; and to develop recommendations that are rooted in restorative justice for addressing, engaging, and reconciling those communities. The commission the state established has received supplemental funding from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Emmett Till Cold Case Investigations Program for its efforts. Because of this work, Governor Hogan issued posthumous pardons last month for 34 victims of racial lynching in Maryland.

This Juneteenth, I encourage all Marylanders to recognize this day as an opportunity to reflect upon our Nation’s shared history and to recognize the enduring effects of slavery on our society. Celebrating a new federal holiday is not a replacement for the important, redemptive work necessary yearlong to move us closer to a more just and perfect union. We must address what is happening in America today and not only the events of 1865.

Thank you. Enjoy your weekend and stay safe.



Ben Cardin